

Northern Californians who spent last summer breathing smoke or being forced from their home by the blazes that tore through our local forests are well aware that wildfire is one of our most pressing threats. The 2008 fire season saw over a million acres of our forests burned, the tragic loss of several wildland firefighters, the evacuation of thousands of our fellow citizens, and the loss of hundreds of homes and businesses. As we enter our third year of drought and a forest management situation that has yet to improve, this year's fire season could prove to just as devastating as the last, if not worse.

Fire is often characterized as the result of three factors: heat (ignition source), weather, and fuel. Despite the enactment of numerous legislative and administrative actions to address the only factor truly within our control - the fuel - our national forests have become an overgrown mess of small-diameter trees ridden with insects and disease that stand ready to serve as a tinderbox for the next lightning strike or stray spark. In addition to more recent

Congressional initiatives such as the

Healthy Forests Restoration Act
and

Secure Rural Schools and Community Self-Determination Act

, Senator Feinstein and I worked together over a decade ago to pass the

Herger-Feinstein Quincy Library Group Forest Recovery Act

, to implement a pilot project developed by local interests to bring about fuels reduction, forest management, and community stability in three of our northern California national forests.

These efforts have hinged on collaboration to conduct science-based forest management, but they have largely been stymied through appeals and litigation led by groups beholden to the misguided notion that forest management and environmental protections are mutually exclusive.

Most North State residents fully understand this reality. Unfortunately, the opposing views to balanced forest management largely come from those residing in cities far from the forests they aim to "protect."

Currently these fringe groups are allowed to - for the cost of a postage stamp - file lawsuits against any forest management project on federal land that they happen to spot in the Federal Register.

These actions occur notwithstanding the input and collaboration from professional foresters or other similarly trained experts, thus allowing these minority views to displace the efforts of the many individuals who hold a vested interest in sound forest management and reducing the dangerous fuel load surrounding our forest communities.

To address this issue I have introduced the "California Catastrophic Wildfire Prevention and Community Protection Act of 2009." This legislation builds on and expands existing authorities and efforts to achieve fuels treatment in our at-risk communities and watersheds to reduce the risk of wildfire through implementation of collaboratively-developed hazardous fuels reduction and forest thinning projects. The legislation also establishes an emergency process to expedite these projects should the county, in concurrence with the state, declare an emergency due to the threat of wildfire.

In his inaugural address, President Obama spoke of "restor[ing] science to its rightful place." It is my hope that the Administration and Congress will work with me to change this current deadlock and allow science and commonsense to prevail in response to these wildfires and the destruction they cause to our forests and other public lands.

Our communities and the well-being of the environment depend on it.